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SUBJECT: Ambassador's Web Chat on VietnamNet Provides
Uncensored Forum on Bilateral Issues

11. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador participated for the first time in a web chat with VietnamNet online, reaching over 100,000 readers with over 300,000 hits the first day. The one-hour, no holds barred chat covered a wide range of topics including human rights, religious freedom, democratic systems, Agent Orange and trade issues. One highlight was a human rights question posed by a Vietnamese-American in San Diego who accused GVN leaders of seriously violating their citizens' basic human rights. The transcript of the chat was posted in Vietnamese the same day with virtually no censorship, allowing for unusual access to the general public through the Communist Party-controlled media. We suspect VietnamNet officials used the celebration of the tenth anniversary of normalization of bilateral relations as the lever to line up Party approval for the online chat. Time will tell whether we will be able to parlay this success into more web chats. End Summary.

12. (U) On July 13, a day after marking the tenth anniversary of normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, the Public Affairs Section (PAS) arranged for the Ambassador to hold an unprecedented, live web chat program with VietnamNet, one of the most popular online newspapers in Vietnam. Due to the large volume (over 100) and repetition of questions received via internet, VietnamNet's Editor in Chief, Nguyen Anh Tuan, and APAO chose a number of questions covering a broad range of topics during the one-hour session.

13. (U) The Vietnamese transcript of the web chat was uploaded overnight with virtually no censorship of either question or answer on the following site:

<http://vietnamnet.vn/10namvietmy/2005/07/4679> 47/

Highlights from the exchange (not a transcript) in English were uploaded the following day under VietnamNet's special section on the tenth anniversary of normalization with the headline "Communication Important for Better Understanding: U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam" and subheading "Michael Marine, the United States Ambassador in Vietnam, had an open and candid talk with VietnamNet readers yesterday afternoon" on the following site:

<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/features/2005/07/468606/>

14. (U) The Ambassador noted the positive development of bilateral relations during this year when we celebrate ten years of normalization and emphasized that the recent visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States has created a momentum for continued expansion and improvement in the bilateral relationship. Stressing the importance of mutual understanding through increased interaction, the Ambassador called for more visits by Vietnamese citizens and officials to the United States (and vice versa), including an expanded dialogue with Members of Congress.

15. (U) Many readers asked questions related to China, with the Editor noting that the Ambassador had served there prior to coming to Vietnam. Readers probed China's growing role in the region and the question of the United States as a "counterweight" to that presence. The Ambassador responded that there are similarities between Vietnam's economic reform path and China's, but differences as well. He stated firmly that the United States wants to have relations with Vietnam because of the importance of Vietnam, not because of China.

16. (U) The Ambassador reiterated the USG's strong support of Vietnam's early accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), saying that entry into WTO would set the stage for more investment from the United States and other countries to Vietnam, allowing the two countries to become "constructive trading partners." He advised that since Vietnam is competing with other countries to attract investors, it must create a rule of law, ensure transparency in its regulations and take effective steps against corruption.

17. (U) Several readers questioned the relevance of human rights as an issue between the two countries when there are other "more important issues" to consider. In response,

the Ambassador said that the United States wants to develop its relationship with Vietnam in many areas, not just in trade and commerce. He continued that President Bush has made clear that the way the issue of human rights is handled between the two countries ultimately has an impact on the overall relationship and its growth.

18. (U) Another question on human rights came from a Vietnamese-American in San Diego who inquired as to what the Ambassador would do to make Vietnamese leaders know they are "seriously violating" their citizens' basic human rights. The Ambassador responded that the United States will continue to engage the Vietnamese Government, explaining the importance of human rights and the benefits of respecting people's rights to religious freedom. He noted that a number of individuals have been released in the past year through amnesties granted by the Vietnamese Government and added that we hope to see more released in the future. He praised steps that the Vietnamese authorities have taken to create a new policy framework on religious freedom, which lays a foundation for providing Vietnamese citizens more opportunities to practice their beliefs. He stressed that the United States will continue to work with the GVN on this issue in the hope that Vietnam eventually will be removed from the list of Countries of Particular Concern.

19. (U) In response to a question about the USG's views on "rivaling forces" in and out of Vietnam that interfere with Vietnam's internal affairs, the Ambassador responded that the United States fully supports the territorial integrity of Vietnam and any effort to change this will not receive U.S. support. However, Americans are free to say what they think, including expressing objections to the government policies and even the political system of Vietnam, which may sometimes be difficult for Vietnamese officials to understand.

110. (U) Regarding the Agent Orange lawsuit, the Ambassador said he could not comment on a case still pending in courts, but noted that the American people and government would continue efforts for humanitarian support to Vietnamese with all types of disabilities, and that the United States has already provided 35 million dollars for programs related to disabilities in Vietnam. He explained that the issue of Agent Orange should be solved through constructive efforts on both sides in scientific areas to better understand the effects of dioxin. He also noted that use of the issue for propaganda purposes is harmful to the bilateral relationship. The Editor in Chief closed the web chat with a message he noted President Bush often uses, "God Bless America."

111. (SBU) Comment: Established in 2000 and reportedly receiving over two million hits per month, VietnamNet is one of the first e-newspapers created in Vietnam and has a solid reputation of providing timely and broad information, particularly among young readers and Vietnamese Americans living abroad. Its main competitor is VN Express, with a handful of smaller online sites trailing behind because they lack the ability to post news items immediately. VietnamNet's Editor-in-Chief, Nguyen Anh Tuan, who conducted the web chat, is a good PAS contact and the brother-in-law of the President of the Vietnam Education Foundation, Kien Pham. We have been told that the Culture and Ideology Commission paid a visit to Tuan the day after the webchat. No changes have been made to the website except for a disclaimer to the question from the San Diego reader that his views do not reflect those of VietnamNet.

112. (SBU) This is the first time any Mission officer has held a live web chat with an online newspaper in Vietnam. The range of topics discussed and questions taken, even from readers outside Vietnam, was unprecedented and reflected what was on the minds of VietnamNet's readers. That sensitive topics such as democracy, corruption, human rights and religious freedom were all reported with virtually no censorship is an unusual occurrence. Perhaps this degree of openness was buoyed by the successful visit of the Prime Minister to the United States and the ten year anniversary of normalization. Post will continue to advocate United States policy and concerns to the general public, but only time will tell if we will be able to parlay this success into more web chats. End comment.

MARINE